

What is the Matter with Transcendence? On the Place of Religion in the New  
Anthropology of Ethics

Marett Lecture – 2015

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As early as Robert Marett's 1902 essay "Origin and Validity in Ethics," he announced that ethics was one amongst several "organised interests" of the human spirit that move people to action and he went on to note that feeling was central to its ability to accomplish this task, since "thought unsupported by feeling is powerless to found a habit of will" (p. 233; 240). A consultation of Marett's (1932) later book Faith, Hope and Charity in Primitive Religion confirms that he had not abandoned this idea by the time of his 1931-2 Gifford Lectures, and he was then even inclined to see religion as most importantly a source of feeling, and at least primitive religion as a source of those feelings that turn moral thoughts into spurs to action. Something like these issues that preoccupied Marett make a late appearance in my own attempt to relate ethics and religion in what follows, though admittedly the key lines of debate and the theoretical tools I will want to bring to bear on them are so different from Marett's own as to be nearly unrecognizable from within his own framework. It seems clear, we might say, that from his time to ours everything has changed. Everything except, that is, the most important questions, which still have a familiar ring. So while I will start elsewhere than a close reading of Marett's work, and I will end up somewhere other than he did, I hope the echoes of his concerns are audible nonetheless.

Having already signaled a rapid shift to a more current idiom, let me turn immediately to noting that the very rapid growth of interest in the study of ethics has

been one of the most notable recent developments in anthropology. From a marginal or at best background concern at the end of the last century, the anthropology of ethics has come to approach the status of something like a key trend in the contemporary discipline. With the ambition to lead a major reassessment of many core aspects of social theory – most notably those that hover around the nature of human action – and the promise to do so while opening up new horizons for ethnographic work by helping us attend to kinds of data we once ignored, the study of ethics has quickly achieved its lofty position by generating interest quite broadly throughout anthropology. Indeed, cross-cutting sub-disciplines and regional concerns, ethics is one of the few topics that is even a candidate to provide some unity to an increasingly fragmented field in which specialists more and more frequently struggle to find interest in work produced beyond their regional, topical, and theoretical borders. Having made its way to the main stage of our sprawling discipline, the study of ethics is set to make a significant mark on how anthropology is practiced for the foreseeable future.

There are surely many reasons the anthropology of ethics has taken off so quickly in the last several years, many of them related to the fact that looking back it is easy to see that it was absurd that it took so long to develop. It seems obvious now, in ways it did not even fifteen years ago, that to have a human science that ignores the role of ethics in personal and social life has to be a mistake. So the anthropology of ethics points to and then fills an important, almost embarrassing, gap in disciplinary thought, and the relatively straightforward claim that it does so has to be part of any story of its recent success. But along with that explanation, I would like to suggest that another reason the anthropology of ethics has generated excitement so widely in the discipline is that it has

spent a lot of time at the frontier stage, in which there is as yet no normal science to stifle creativity and experiment, and in which the arrival of virtually every new journal issue holds out the promise of some novel approach to the topic worth looking into (Robbins 2012a). Those with an interest in Aristotle, or ordinary language philosophy, or the anthropological linguistic study of interaction, or phenomenology, or however we want to classify Foucault, or even the classical social theory of Durkheim and Weber all make contributions, and they can do so while studying all manner of topics, from state level politics to kinship, from gift giving to lying, from sickness to healing, and from religious piety to cutting edge business practices. To this point, the anthropology of ethics has pitched a broad tent, and it is surely in part its habit of welcoming all comers that has allowed it to do so in the discipline's center ring.

Using an older terminology indebted to Thomas Kuhn (1996), we can call the welcoming quality of the anthropology of ethics that I have just described a pre-paradigmatic openness. I have mentioned it, and its likely role in the explosive growth of the field, because I have a sense that the era marked by this radical openness might soon draw to a close. In the last few years, more and more people who contribute to the anthropological study of ethics have come to define what they study as “ordinary” or “everyday” ethics. Ever since 2010, when Michael Lambek edited a landmark volume with the title “Ordinary Ethics,” one sees that phrase and its near cognate “everyday ethics” with increasing frequency in the literature. They have become terms to conjure with, and this has been an important development, bringing some momentum toward theoretical progress to the anthropology of ethics to complement the widely creative but in no sense cumulative tendencies that have marked its frontier phase, and equally

notably generating real critical debate where there had once been mostly parallel play (e.g. Clarke 2014, Lempert 2013, Parkin n.d., Zigon 2014). To again draw on broadly Kuhnian terms, the rise of everyday ethics signals, I think, that an intellectual maturation of the anthropology of ethics is afoot – it marks the advent of what Morgan Clarke (2014: 419) calls “discrete disciplinary pressures” as to what one’s proper subjects ought to be’ when one turns to the study of ethics - and it seems likely that to whatever extent the anthropology of ethics does develop toward a state of normal science, it will be one that itself highlights the social equivalent of such normalcy as it unfolds under the sign of ordinary or everyday life.

The increasing focus on the ordinary and the everyday, and the normalizing sense of disciplinary momentum it has brought to the anthropology of ethics, are all to the good, and I hope that nothing in my forgoing narration of its ascent to prominence suggests otherwise. But of course every vantage point has its blind spots, and in what follows I want to take up one of the potential limits of the view from the ordinary and the everyday. The potential blind spot I am worried about is one that obscures the contribution of religion, or of the transcendent, to ethics. Religion is not necessarily the opposite of the ordinary and everyday, but as an exercise it is worth considering such standard antonyms to these terms as “extraordinary,” “exceptional,” and “unusual” and noting that these terms all apply to the sacred and to religion more generally. Understood as it often is in these terms, the sacred seems a notion that does not effortlessly inhabit the world of the ordinary and the everyday.

I recognize that these quick semantic observations invite all kinds of quibbling, but I make them by way of introducing a more empirically grounded point, which is that

up until now, religion really has not been central to the theorization of everyday, ordinary ethics. Thus Lambek's and Veena Das's influential, founding theoretical statements of the ordinary ethics position do not draw on theories of religion, even as they do sometimes take up Austin-inspired accounts of ritual performativity as an aspect of everyday linguistic interaction.<sup>1</sup> And James Laidlaw's (2014) path breaking book-length construction of the field, which while not framed as a work of ordinary ethics per se is in sustained and careful dialogue with this development, likewise does not draw much on theory of religion in laying out its approach. There is an irony here, of course, in that Lambek is one of the leading anthropological scholars of religion at work today, and Laidlaw, along with many others who contribute to the ordinary ethics discussion would also, in their other work, count as important contributors to this field. All of them are comfortable handling religious materials, which, for example, make up the majority of the examples in Laidlaw's book. But, I want to suggest, considerations of the nature of religion as a phenomenon, as opposed to empirical data on religious life, have not so far figured much in their construction of anthropological theories of ethics. My ultimate aim in this article is to ask what difference it would make were they to do so.

### **The Ordinary and the Religious**

Though most of us probably have a strong sense that we know everyday life when we see it, the ordinary and the everyday can be somewhat elusive notions when one approaches them with definitional intent (Sayeau 2013: 8). And in a critical mood one might want to note that they also have a history, and mostly a modern one, and so as concepts they are not always as innocent or uncomplicated as they sometimes appear to

be. For present purposes, however, it is enough simply to indicate how those who promote the study of everyday or ordinary ethics reflect on their own use of these terms. Two widely cited statements from the key figures in the field that I have already mentioned are worth exploring in this regard. After referring to Aristotle to make the point that ethics is first of all ordinary in the sense that it is “basic to the human condition,” Lambek (2010a: 2), in his introduction to his volume on ordinary ethics, goes on to add that “[s]econd...the ‘ordinary’ implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself.” Das (2012: 134), who like Lambek relies in part on work in ordinary language philosophy, asserts in somewhat similar tones in essay entitled “Ordinary Ethics” that what is called for is “a shift in perspective from thinking of ethics as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects.” From this point of view, ethical work “is done not by orienting oneself to transcendental, agreed-upon values but rather through the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday” (her emph.). It is not difficult to detect, even from these brief snippets of text, a binary scaffolding on which the sense of the everyday at work in them rests. The everyday, at least in these accounts, is for the tacit against the explicit, the practiced against the known or believed, sensibility over values and rules, and the imminent over the transcendent. If we take all of the discarded terms together – the explicit, the known and believed, the codified rule, values, and the transcendent, it is

hard not suspect that religion is an important part of what the everyday is not, and what ordinary ethics does not, to use a favored expression of Das's (138, 146), "leap" over into.

The point that the everyday is decidedly not religious is even occasionally made explicit, at least in passing, in the texts from which I have been quoting. Thus, in noting that ethics is ordinary because it is "basic" to human life, Lambek (2010a: 2) suggests that "it need not be singled out as an explicit category or department of human thought nor constituted, as Maurice Bloch (1992 and elsewhere) sees religion and as some philosophers have seen metaphysics, at the expense of the ordinary." He then goes on to contrast everyday settings to contexts that at least sound religious in which ethics does become explicit, such as "in prophetic movements of social and ethical renewal; and...among priestly classes attempting to rationalize and educate." And turning again to Das (138), one of her aims is to show "how dramatic enactments of ethical value, as in publicly performed rituals...are grounded within the normative practices of everyday life." Here religious ritual is secondary, and more generally in ordinary ethics a turn to religion on the part of the people we study has a slight tinge of a fall from grace. Religion – with its supposed habits of distanced reflection, love of explicitly formulated rules and values, and tendency to speak in imperative tones – is only necessary for those who somehow cannot work out their ethical lives in the comfortable immanence of the everyday. A harshly lit realm of imposing, codified demands, rather than quiet, smoothly unfolding skilled practice, the transcendent comes off from the ordinary point of view as an agent of rough justice at best, and a source of profound alienation from truly ethical human living at worst.



The goal of my argument from here on out is to suggest that this is not a fair account of the religious or the transcendent. For one thing, as Webb Keane (2010: 69) has reminded us in one his contributions to the anthropological understanding of ethics, human beings really do sometimes stand back from the flow of their lives – it's the kind of thing that, as human beings, they can do, and often enough they resort to it. Such standing back, I want to suggest, is not less basic to people's ethical existence than their ability to participate in the flow of everyday life. And for another thing, what humans learn from such exercises of standing back from or "leaping out" of the everyday can, *pace* Das, inform their everyday ethics at least as much as it is grounded in them. For these reasons, I think the anthropological study of ethics would be impoverished if it were reduced to the study only of its ordinary, everyday forms, and in fact maybe the everyday itself does not make sense without some attention to the religious as well.

I am going to develop my argument in two steps. In the first, I want to present an understanding of religion as at least in part a matter of the transcendent, and more importantly to offer an image of the transcendent that is not as scary – neither as metaphysically alienating nor as demanding – as it often appears to be from an ordinary ethics point of view. Then, in the second, I want to look at one form of transcendent religious representation – the representations of values produced by ritual – to begin to sketch a picture of how religion informs ethical life in ways that do not explain away or traduce its everyday qualities, but that at the same time do not leave them to stand wholly on their own.

### **On the Transcendent**

Our English word “transcendence” is derived from Latin terms that mean “to surpass” or “to go beyond” (Van Harvey 1964: 242). Merriam Webster online suggests that current usage stays close to these roots, offering as the first two glosses: “exceeding usual limits : surpassing” and “extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience.” The sense in which the transcendent is defined in opposition to the everyday is evident here. It is, however, worth pausing over what we want to mean by “exceeding” and “surpassing.” In some sense, I think these can be taken as simply descriptive terms, pointing to a slightly less freighted notion of being “beyond” the ordinary than we might be tempted to imagine. But they also carry with them some sense of the elevated, the excessive, or the magisterial that ordinary ethicists point to when painting the transcendent as awe-inspiring and commanding in ways that block the desirable flow of the everyday. It is this sense of the imposing quality of the transcendent that I want to dial back here, though not mute entirely. Put more positively, I want to foreground a kinder, gentler side of the transcendent that we might take to enrich rather than destroy the everyday, even as it does not collapse into it.

But before I turn to illuminating the friendlier face of the transcendent, let me pause briefly to note that I am happy to identify religion with the transcendent more generally. I do not want to dwell on this point, which would immediately detain us in the deep waters that churn around the very cross-cultural validity of the concept of religion, but mostly just to accept it for the purposes of the argument I making. Durkheim’s minimal definition of religion as pertaining to sacred matters that are beyond and sharply separated from profane ones paints the religious as transcendent in relation to the everyday in a straightforward way I am happy to accept here. Csordas’ (2004)

identification of religion with alterity, to take a more recent example, points in broadly similar directions. Even as I find intriguing the suggestion made by proponents of axial age theories that some religions stress or greatly extend the distance of the sacred from the profane, such that we might differentiate religions from one another on the basis of the varying degrees of transcendence upon which they insist, I will from here on out work with the assumption that all social phenomena we might want to call religions are built around at least some notion of transcendence (Robbins 2009). Taking this point as given from here on out, the question I want to ask is how we might best think of the transcendent realm of religion when our primary goal is to contribute to the anthropological study of ethics. Should we see it primarily as a realm from which issue fearsome divine commands or distressing encouragements to leave behind the worldly concerns of the everyday altogether, or might we see it as having a different kind of contribution to make to ethical life?

A good starting point for reconsidering the nature of the transcendent is the work Alfred Schutz, the well known social philosopher with strong connections to both Husserl and Weber. It is Schutz's phenomenological side that most interests us here, for it leads him to argue that transcendence is inescapable in human life – for there are always things that are important to us that are outside our immediate perceptual experience but that we can represent to ourselves by means of various kinds of signs. Based on the different ways in which the things we represent to ourselves are beyond immediate experience, Schutz lays out three categories of transcendence – the “little,” “medium” and “great” transcendencies (Schutz and Luckmann 1989:105). Little transcendencies are those in which the transcendent item is presently beyond our immediate perceptual experience,

but could have been part of that experience in the past and may be so again in the future. When I leave the living room to enter the kitchen, the living room is now transcendent in relation to my immediate experience, though I can always turn back and make it present once again. Middle transcendencies, for Schutz, are other people, whom we realize have an inner life like our own which we can never experience directly. The inner experience of my friends can never be present to me the way the living room can, but Schutz suggests that it is still the case that we feel we overcome the gap between us much of the time. Therefore, Schutz asserts that the little and the medium transcendencies are alike in that the “boundaries of experience that are being crossed are everyday ones, and the crossings themselves are likewise everyday ones” (p. 145). By contrast, the great transcendencies, which include religion (as well as theoretical thinking and dreaming), involve objects we realize we can never experience directly in everyday terms. We have to leave everyday life, or what Schutz, in Husserlian terms, calls the natural attitude, and take on an “unnatural attitude” in which we take a distance from our normal practical motives and structures of relevance, if we want to experience such great transcendencies in their immediacy rather than just represent them to ourselves (125, 130).

On Schutz’s model, as I have just laid it out, we are entangled in transcendence all the time, so in itself transcendence is nothing special. As he notes, in a statement I think is worth pondering more thoroughly than I am able to here for what it suggests about how to think about the everyday, without representations of transcendent phenomena, what he calls “appresentations,” “a person would remain to a considerable extent caught within the limits of the flux of actually present experiences; without the appresentations themselves, completely caught. There would be life and lived experiences, perhaps even

encounters, but no *life-world*" (132, his *emph.*). So the everyday is shot through, even constituted in large part by, transcendence. But even so, the great transcendencies, and religion among them, do in experiential terms take us beyond the everyday. They build on very basic human experiential and representational capacities, but to produce effects that, we might say, are not themselves quite so basic.

Unfortunately, Schutz does not give us much of a sense of the kind of things that are represented in the great transcendencies. He tells us how we can get to religious transcendence without having to abandon representational paths that have a lot in common with those upon which we always walk, but he does not tell us what to expect inside the transcendent realm once we enter it. For that, we are going to have to turn to some anthropologists.

Maurice Bloch's work is helpful here. He has recently offered an account of religion that roots it in the human cognitive capacity of imagination. Though Bloch is working in a different theoretical lineage than Schutz, I think there is enough overlap in their concerns, particularly a shared interest in the nature of different kinds of human cognition, that we can usefully draw on Bloch to help us get beyond the point where Schutz leaves us. At the heart of Bloch's model of religion is a distinction between what he calls the transactional and the transcendental social. The transactional social consists in the give and take of everyday life, a fluid arena open to change in which people assert themselves, sometimes manipulate or try to influence others, and more generally (and here I am drawing on some of Bloch's earlier work – see Bloch and Parry 1989) mostly work to reach relatively short term, sometimes fully achievable, goals (Bloch 2008: 2056). By contrast, the transcendental social is made up of "essentialized roles and

groups” of the kind social anthropologists have long taken as the prime constituents of social structure (2008: 2056). People see these roles as more or less immutable and fixed. Individual occupants of idealized roles may leave them for various reasons, including role failure and death, but the roles and groups will continue to exist. It is for this reason that social structure in general appears to people to have a “permanence which negates the fluidity of life” and therefore transcends it (Bloch 2012: 114). For Bloch, then, the transcendence of the transcendental social has to do in part with being impervious to the flux of the everyday as constituted by the transactional social. But Bloch also explains such transcendence in terms that come much closer to those of Schutz, for he too stresses that people cannot perceive roles and groups directly. Instead, they must be products of the imagination that become socially shared and are therefore represented to experience, rather than given to it directly.

Like Schutz, Bloch does not completely separate the transcendental from the transactional, even as he continues to preserve its distinctiveness. As he puts it, there “is plenty of transactional social in human sociality that occurs side by side or in combination with the transcendental social”, and people may “use the existence of the transcendental social as one of the many counters used in the transactional game” (2008: 2056). To illustrate this point, and his argument more generally, Bloch discusses a Malagasy village elder he has known for many years. By the time Bloch writes his essay, this elder has become very old, somewhat senile and physically weak. He spends most days curled up in a blanket. Yet people continue to approach him with respect, deference and fear, and in ritual contexts they always put him in charge so that he can bless the participants. At the same time, however, people no longer involve this man in the

transactional contexts in which they play the “Machiavellian game of influence,” and in this respect they are happy to leave him out of the flow of “everyday” transactional social life (2008:2056). He has lost most of his transactional footing, and more and more is treated by those around him only in his transcendent role – a last step toward finally achieving an ancestral existence even more fully beyond the transactional world.

The everyday for Bloch is thus a realm in which people mix and/or shuttle back and forth between transactional and transcendental conceptualizations of who they and others are and what they and others are doing. What we tend to call the transcendent or religious, he argues, is a realm much more solely focused the idealized roles and groups generated out of the imagination. So following Bloch, part of the answer to the question Schutz left us with, the question of what kinds of things can be found to populate the realm of the transcendent, is that it is filled with the kinds of roles and groups we have called social structure. But surely there must also exist other inhabitants of the transcendent. One I would like to suggest is values. I do not mean to imply that values are the only constituents of the transcendent besides idealized roles and groups, just that they are another one that is worth examining for anthropologists of religion. We might, in this connection, recall that values are one of things that Das assigned to the transcendent and thereby defined the ordinary against, and that Lambek (2010b: 61), though he has carried out important work on ethical values elsewhere (2008), in a second essay on ordinary ethics that is a companion to the one from which I drew above also states explicitly that values (along with rules) are not, as he conceives of things, part of the “substance” of ethics. I want to suggest that there are resources available in the anthropology of religion that can help us avoid such summary judgment about values and

can thereby help us round out our understanding not only of ethics in general, but ultimately also of its ordinary varieties.

### On Ritual, Values and Transcendence

At least in terms of throwing values into the transcendent box, I think Das has a point. While I do not want to tarry too long with defining values in an article that is already a bit heavy with definitional exertions, let us take values as representations of the good or what people take to be, all things considered, desirable. That is to say, whether or not people at every moment desire the things values represent, people do acknowledge in a second order way that they are worth desiring. They know, to put it in terms that bear more centrally on issues of ethics, that it is good to desire them, even if this does not mean their desire for them is constant. Like roles and groups then, people do not always immediately experience values in their fullest form in the ordinary course of things – sometimes during the flow of everyday life the ethical desire values are capable of awakening is not to the fore - yet people can still, on reflection, appreciate their desirability. This is one sense in which we can say values at times transcend ordinary experience.

But there is also a second reason that it makes sense to talk about values as transcendent. In all social systems, as I have argued elsewhere drawing on the works of Dumont, Weber, and Berlin, values at times come into conflict with one another (Robbins 2013). To take a case that it to hand from some recent reading, many people who were liberal, elite university students in the United States in the late 1930s up through 1940, having grown up in long shadow of World War I, felt very strongly attached to the values



of peace and justice. The question of whether the United States should remain isolationist or join World War II became a problem for them when these two values came into conflict, raising issues of when peace could be abandoned for the sake of justice, and when it could not (Gilkey 2001: 4-10). This clash of values is quite dramatic, but we are all familiar with others that are less so both from our own lives and from our fieldwork. In academic lectures, I sometimes illustrate this point by reminding people of the clash of the academic values of honesty and politeness that sometimes arise when someone asks us what we thought of their presentation, or, drawing on something that used to show up in a lot of ethnographies, I bring up the conflict people in many places regularly experience between realizing values tied to affinity and those tied to kinship. Because conflicts frequently beset the realization of values in everyday life in this way, I do not think we find them worked out in very full or coherent form there. For reasons I will come back to, we feel the conflicting pulls of values in the everyday, but mostly we muddle along without sorting out fully what any one value really looks like or demands of us. This may in fact be part of what Das appreciates about everyday life, and it certainly supports her casting of “transcendent...values” out of it.<sup>2</sup> But if conflicts between values mean we do not usually experience the full force of any one of them in the course of ordinary living, where in our experience do we encounter that force? Here I want to follow Bloch and suggest that one place we find it is in the transcendent as that comes to us in through our participation in the realm of religion.

I have recently made an argument about values that is similar to the one I am making here that suggests that one place people find clearly articulated versions of single values is in ritual (Robbins 2015).<sup>3</sup> Since developing that argument, I have discovered

that Victor Turner had made a very similar one in his classic 1964 (1967) piece “Symbols in Ndembu Ritual.” Here I want to lay out his way of constructing the argument, as I think it stays more neatly within anthropological boundaries than my own previous one, and also because I can flesh it out, as he does, with his rich Ndembu ethnography.

The ritual upon which Turner focuses in his article is the Nkang’a, the “girl’s puberty ritual” of the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia (1967: 20). Like all Ndembu rituals, Nkang’a has a dominant, or what the Ndembu call a “senior,” symbol (20). Dominant symbols in Ndembu ritual are usually trees, and for Nkang’a the tree in question is the muddyi tree, at the base of which the novice lies, wrapped in a blanket. When the light bark of this tree is scratched, it exudes a milky white latex, and the Ndembu regard this as its key characteristic, leading Turner to refer to it as the “milk tree” (20). The matrilineal Ndembu build on this feature of the tree to interpret it as symbolizing breast milk, breasts more generally, bonds between mothers and children, matriliney, tribal custom and finally, “at its highest level of abstraction...the unity and continuity of Ndembu society” (21). When Turner asked Ndembu to tell him what the tree and the rite in which it plays a central role mean, these were the answers they gave him.

Focused as they are on social structural categories from the family to the matrilineal clan and ultimately Ndembu society as a whole, Ndembu discussions of the Nkang’a clearly dwell on categories belonging to what Bloch would call the transcendental social. But, Turner tells us, in conversations on the ritual the Ndembu are also talking about values – aspects of their social life, such as corporate belonging (1968: 23), that they find desirable. As he puts it, regardless of whatever practical ends a ritual

may aim at, such as turning a girl into a marriageable women, the dominant symbols at the center of them may be regarded as “ends in themselves, as representative of the axiomatic values of the widest Ndembu society” (32). Drawing on a further aspect of his argument, we might even suggest that it is rituals which “create” these values, or at least lend them the desirable quality that makes them more than inert ideals. This is where it is important to recall Turner’s once famous argument that major symbols have both a sensory pole - one that refers to experience-near, or in Schutz’s terms directly perceptible, “natural and physiological phenomena and processes” - and an ideological pole that refers to core social values (28). Part of what ritual does, on Turner’s account, is to attach the strong positive associations of important immediate experiences like breast feeding to abstract, transcendental values like matriliney and the unity of social groups (21, 29-30). By deploying symbols that affect such a transfer between the sensory and the ideological, ritual becomes “precisely a mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable” (30). Here, then, is an account of ritual that focuses on its ability to present participants with clearly articulated representations of transcendental ideals of great importance for the societies in which they live and to render those ideals desirable in ways that turn them into values.

But why do people need to “leap” out of everyday life in order to encounter such values? Why is it difficult, if not impossible, for them to find experiences of them in everyday life. Why, to refer back to Schutz, do values belong to the great transcendencies, rather than to those little and middles transcendencies that can be easily accessed from within ordinary life? Turner has an answer to this question which

dovetails nicely with the very brief argument I made above that value conflicts render the appearance of values in the everyday mostly partial and compromised.

Characteristically, Turner addresses this issue by way of some subtle ethnographic observations. The Ndembu are matrilineal and virilocal – mothers and children live in their husband's and father's villages, but they inherit their land and social status from their mother's or grandmother's group. Ndembu life is thus subject to all the tensions that are well known to beset what Levi-Strauss (1969), in an apt phrase, used to call "disharmonic regimes." There are predictable tensions, for example, between men and women, mothers and daughters, father's and sons, and mother's brother's and sister's sons. Values attaching to different relationship are often "incompatible" and people "who observe one set of norms find that they may transgress equally rules belonging to another set" (1968: 10-11). Turner's genius shows in his recognition that even as Ndembu people, when they tell him about Nkang'a, mention only the core values of various kinds of corporate unity that it upholds through the symbolism of the milk tree, by ritual design they practice the rite in ways that give expression to many of the tensions that compromise the realization of these values in daily life. For example, as women dance around the tree and the novice lying at its base, they dramatize opposition to men by taunting them and preventing them from joining most parts of the dance (23). In being enacted for a single novice, the rite also opposes her to other girls, and to the group of adult women she is about to join, who are represented during the rite as making her suffer (23). So too, the novice's mother is opposed to the group of adult women, who prevent her from dancing around the tree. This, Turner notes, represents "the conflict between the matricentric family and the wider society...articulated by matriliney" (24).

And in Turner's essay, the list of enacted conflicts goes on (24-25). In practice, the ritual exhibits in clear form the kinds of everyday value conflicts that beset ordinary Ndembu life.

As Turner interprets this fact, it does not invalidate the statements Ndembu routinely make that the tree and the ritual that takes place around it express the values of various kinds of group solidarity. Rather, he proffers, the values are central to the rite and the enacted conflicts only serve to stress their importance. This is so because in rituals such as Nkang'a the "raw energies of conflict are domesticated into the service of social order" (39). Now, this is a common Manchester School kind of claim, and I am not sure precisely how Turner argues for it here (it does not, for example, in any way follow directly from his argument about the polar qualities of symbols, upon which he based his claim that ritual makes values desirable). But I think he is on to something nonetheless. I would argue that the ritual has this effect precisely by suggesting that the dominant symbol does not itself represent the conflicts enacted around it, but rather actively overcomes them in the process of rendering clear expressions of "norms and values in their abstract purity" (38). It is as if ritual dramatizes in its unfolding the transcendental imperviousness of values to the evanescent, changeable, sometimes conflicted qualities of the everyday to which Bloch drew our attention. It does so by first giving vivid expression to everyday value conflicts, but then, in the course of its progression, "demonstrating" that it is possible to realize a single value or, as Turner puts it, "closely, and on the whole harmoniously, interrelated" values, on their own, in something approaching their transcendental form (40).

I can perhaps make this last point more clearly by turning briefly to an example of a ritual drawn from my own fieldwork among the Urapmin of the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. During the period of my fieldwork in the early 1990s, the Urapmin were relatively recent converts to a charismatic form of Christianity. By the time I arrived in Urapmin, everyone in the community had converted and Christianity was at the center of much of people's public and private lives. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere, in Urapmin Christian morality has come into conflict with a tradition of Urapmin moral thinking in which aggressive, self-interested behavior they call "willful" is valued to some extent, provided it is balanced by what they define as "lawful" behavior oriented toward the legitimate expectations and demands of others. Even after conversion, the conduct of much of Urapmin social life continues to demand both willful and lawful behavior. This demand is rendered problematic, however, by the fact that Urapmin Christian morality defines all willful feelings and actions as sinful, and it enjoins people only to experience and act on lawful thoughts and feelings if they want to be saved. The goal of Urapmin Christians is therefore to cultivate an "easy" or "quiet" heart filled with "good thinking" that will lead them to live a lawful "Christian life" (Robbins 2004).

Given that traditional and Christian morality conflict in Urapmin, and that people there still need to rely on traditional patterns of moral action in key stretches of everyday life, their lives are marked by a conflict between the values of willfulness and lawfulness. Everyday life, in particular, rarely provides a setting in which Urapmin feel they have resolved this conflict, and this leads them to define themselves as deeply sinful people. But in their Christian rituals, they regularly do endeavor to create images of

uncompromised lawfulness and to perform such lawfulness for themselves. To illustrate this point, I want to consider just one of their Christian rituals, the Sunday morning church service.<sup>4</sup>

Urapmin attend church services quite frequently, sometimes even twice daily. Of all services, however, those on Sunday morning are the most well attended and are treated as important community-wide events. For this reason, I will focus on the Sunday morning service, though my analysis of the way the service aims to realize the value of lawfulness would fit other services as well.

As with the Ndembu Nkanga rite, the Urapmin Sunday service, even as it aims at realizing the value of lawfulness, also allows for, and gives ritual expression to, the value of willfulness. It cannot escape doing this, I will suggest, because its overall temporal structure is constructed so as to enact the lawful overcoming of the will, so it must display willfulness in its very design. We can see this theme at work even in the way Urapmin describe the process by which people come to participate in the rite. In order to take part in the Sunday service, people must come, as the Urapmin put it, “inside the Church.” The inside/outside opposition is an important one for Urapmin Christianity. It is “inside the church,” or as they sometimes say “inside God’s fence” (like penned pigs prevented from destroying human gardens) or “inside the Christian life,” that people are best able to maintain easy hearts and practice lawfulness. As soon as people “go outside” the church or “jump the fence” of Christian life, they enter a world in which it is very difficult not to sin.

Given this understanding of the inside/outside opposition, we can interpret what Urapmin mean by coming “inside the church” as leaving the everyday and its value

conflicts behind. Glossed in this way, it should not come as a surprise that Urapmin do not always find it easy to enter the Church. Services begin when the pastor rings the bell to call people to church. There are always a few people who respond quickly to the bell, come inside the church and begin to sing hymns. But most Sunday mornings many other people feel too caught up in matters of the outside to make a quick break from it when they hear the bell. They dawdle over eating, dressing up, finishing conversations or other matters that anchor them in the everyday. This difference in response ensures that almost all church services begin with a confrontation between lawfulness, as evidenced by the behavior of the pastor (in church before anyone else) and the early responders to his call, and those who straggle in late. Those already in attendance grumble about the willfulness of the latecomers and charge them with “wasting time for church.” Their complaining counts as willful in itself while at the same time highlighting the willfulness of those who have arrived late or who have not yet arrived at all. By means of this regularly repeated scenario, even the process of beginning a service unfolds as a struggle between lawfulness and willfulness.

Once everyone has come inside, marking a first victory for lawful comportment, the service proper begins with a prayer, offered by someone nominated by the pastor. These prayers inevitably include statements about human willfulness and the way it pushes people to sin and then describes the purpose of the church service as allowing people to receive God’s word in their heart, so that they can become lawful. The opening prayer is followed by hymn singing and then a period given over to speeches by local politicians known as big men. These speeches often take up “outside” matters, such as disputes or the difficulties facing one or other major collective project, and the



discussions they initiate are often marked by willfulness and anger. Thus they represent another expression of willfulness in the midst of the church service.

But once the speeches and the discussion around them are finished and someone has offered another prayer, the pastor begins his sermon. Sermons are at the center of Urapmin church services, and they mark the moment during the rite at which willfulness begins to be definitively overcome. As the prayer before the sermon is spoken, attention shifts to the pulpit at the front of the church – the part of the church most identified with lawfulness, for only those known to be free of recent willful sins can preach or sit as deacons on the raised platform upon which the pulpit resets. Like the opening prayer, Urapmin sermons always in one way or another dwell on the importance of lawfulness and the suppression of the will. More than this, they often explicitly address the way in which listening to the sermon in the correct manner itself counts as lawful behavior, while poor attention is itself willful. Here is an example of explicit preaching on this issue taken from a Sunday sermon:

You come inside and you look at each other, you look over to your friend, he looks back at his friend, you move your head around, turn your head from side to side. If you do that, if you are making noise, you won't be able to receive God's talk. God's talk will not be bound (get stuck) in your heart....Just come in quietly and sit down and whatever kind of man is giving talk or news, you think about it and you be peaceful. Then he [Jesus] will come and take you. You Christian people, you yourselves will get heaven, God's kingdom (Robbins 2004: 265-66).

Both in representational content and in the nature of its correct audition, then, the sermon portion of the service focuses on the value of lawfulness.

The sermon is sometimes followed by a period in which various members of the congregation “support” its message by reiterating what the pastor has said about the need for lawfulness and its link to salvation. Then, there comes a final prayer. This prayer is

distinguished from all others in the service by the fact that after a prayer leader chosen by the pastor begins the prayer, everyone in the congregation prays loudly at the same time, creating a cacophonous roar of simultaneous voices that eventually fall away, leaving the prayer leader alone to conclude by naming each of the families in attendance and asking one by one that God bless them all. People then stand up and begin milling around the church and shaking hands, an important lawful gesture in Urapmin life generally (Robbins 2012b). This final act of the rite can last a long time, for each person is careful to shake the hand of everyone else in attendance. The mood during this time is notably “light” and relaxed - it has about it something of Durkheim’s ritual effervescence.

The hand shaking has this effervescent quality, which the service mostly lacks until this point, because, I would suggest, this is the moment in the rite when lawfulness has finally come to full expression. It is when people realize the value of lawfulness in its fullest form as something they themselves are capable of realizing in their own performance. Indeed, I would extend this point by suggesting that Durkheimian effervescence is precisely what it feels like to realize a value fully— to realize something transcendent in its transcendent form, rather than in the piecemeal, often compromised forms in which ones realizes values, if one realizes them at all, in ordinary life. As it happens, Durkheim comes pretty close to making this argument himself and in doing so he takes up some issues not too far removed from those that concerned Marett in the works on ethics and religion that I mentioned at the outset. In order to consider how Durkheim does so, I turn to a short concluding section where the main issue I want to take up is how this foray into the transcendent realm as it appears through the window of religion might inform our consideration of ethics even in its ordinary, everyday forms.

## **Conclusion: Back to Ordinary Ethics**

Just before Turner (1967: 30) tells us how rituals make values an object of desire for their participants, he notes that “Durkheim was fascinated by the problem of why many social norms and imperatives were felt to be at the same time ‘obligatory’ and ‘desirable.’” Unfortunately, Turner does not reference any particular works of Durkheim at this point, and in previous readings of his essay I thought he was making a very general point about Durkheim, one that I found plausible but that did not really feature in my own core reading of the great sociologist. More recently, however, I have come to realize that Turner must have been referring to a specific essay of Durkheim’s: his 1906 piece “The Determination of Moral Facts” (Durkheim 1974, see also Karsenti 2012 for an important reading of this text).<sup>5</sup> It is here that Durkheim takes issue with Kant in a way that is crucial for our understanding of his approach to ethics. Against a Kantian emphasis on the demandingness of moral norms, he argues that moral ends cannot be merely a matter of duty or obligation, they must also be “desirable and desired” (45). If they were not desirable, Durkheim asserts, no one would act on them. A sense of duty alone is not enough to mobilize human action. The desirability of values, Durkheim goes on to suggest, is produced by experiences of the sacred, and therefore of society and of collective sentiments that transcend the individual. Soon we are in the territory of Durkheim’s famous later argument about the ritual production of effervescence and its role in making society something people feel is greater than, even better than, themselves. In this essay, though, the key point is that the socially derived power of the sacred makes values themselves, rather than society more generally, an object of desire. To this

account of how the unusual, uplifting energy of collective sociality creates such desirability, I have added the suggestion that the ways ritual allows people to touch transcendent values in their fullest forms – to perform those values for themselves and see the shape of their complete realization – enables the desirability of single values to gain a hold on people that it can rarely manage to secure in everyday life.

But, and this is where I want to bring my argument to rest, even in the course of everyday life, some of the desirability of values that is produced in transcendent encounters with them must surely still be felt.<sup>6</sup> In the everyday, persons do not, for reasons we have discussed, often attempt to realize single value-linked desires fully. But the pushes and pulls different values exert give everyday life much of its sense of forward-movement, or at least of ethical potential. Although Das (2012: 138) holds out some hope of making habit central to everyday moral accomplishment, she, and even more so Lambek and Laidlaw (2014: 198-199), see some kind of reflection as a key component of ordinary ethics. What I have hoped to indicate here at the end of my argument is that it is the sometimes insistent but often rather more gentle ethical desires various values set in play in the everyday that tip us into reflection and drive the evaluative impulses that saturate ordinary life. Ultimately, these desires and the moral energies they produce have their roots in the sometimes but not always friendlier face of transcendence I have tried to bring into view here, but their forces are felt far from the transcendent realms in which they are produced. Without moving theoretical work on religion into the center of the anthropological study of ethics, this is a crucial aspect of ethical life I think we are likely to miss.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> As implied in the text, Lambek's references to ritual theory are only an apparent exception to this point. His interest is in Rappaport's performative theory of ritual, which in an essay that is a companion to the one I am discussing here he rightly relates immediately back to Austin and then to ordinary language philosophy (Lambek 2010b: 41). Ritual, in the sense Lambek uses it in this context, then becomes a quality of "virtually all speaking" (48, see 54) and he does not attend to any qualities of ritual he identifies as specifically religious.

<sup>2</sup> It is also possible to argue that everyday life has the qualities it often does because within it people strive to realize a value of interactional flow unbroken by various kinds of transactional disfluencies (see, e.g. the work of Garfinkel 1967). The importance of this value for actors in everyday life encourages them to background various value conflicts that arise, settling for value compromises where in transcendent contexts they might not do so. If this analysis is correct, it indicates one way in which the everyday and ordinary themselves are not as effortlessly "immanent" and beyond values as they are sometimes represented.

<sup>3</sup> Two of the reviewers of this paper raise the question of whether in this sentence and the one just above it I am implying that in any given social formation there will be a transcendent realm where the relationship between values is entirely coherent. I do not mean to suggest this. I have elsewhere discussed the fact that all religious traditions that I know of feature more than one kind of ritual and that often the different rituals in a tradition work to realize different values (Robbins 2014). It is the transcendent modeling of single values, particularly in ritual, that I am concerned with here, not the ways relationships between different values are worked out in various social formations (an issue I take up in Robbins 2013).

<sup>4</sup> I have considered another Urapmin Christian ritual from a similar point of view in Robbins 2015. The kind of ethnographic material on the church service I present here is

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gone over in much greater detail elsewhere, though some of the analytic emphases are slightly different in this account (Robbins 2004: 255-268).

<sup>5</sup> I thank Frédéric Keck for pointing me to the relevance of this piece by Durkheim for my work more generally, and to Karsenti's excellent discussion of it.

<sup>6</sup> At this point, my argument joins a number of important recent attempts to explore the relationship between ordinary ethics and other types of ethics or morality (Clarke 2014, Keane 2014, 2015, Parkin Forthcoming). Each of these authors shapes up his argument in his own terms, and all of them do so in terms different than the ones I use here, but I think it makes sense to see them as part of a related theoretical discussion.

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